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## Discoursing on fundamentalist Muslim women: by whom? for whom?

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I thought it would be quite a straightforward thing to define a religiously fundamentalist woman, or a fundamentalist Muslim woman for that matter. She should be one who subscribes to the most important elements, ideas or principles and activities of her faith. These, for her, affect the very nature of life and without which nothing else can exist, and without which nothing else can be imagined. In other words, a fundamentalist Muslim woman is quite *simply* someone who adheres to the original, deep and basic teachings of Islam.

It turns out that 'fundamentalist' Muslim women cannot be that simply defined because apparently 'Islamic fundamentalism' does not straight forwardly mean the 'fundamentals of Islam'. The latter still refers to the teachings of Islam, an appeal to that which is universal and transcendental such as the unity of humanity, the common needs of human individuals for peace within oneself, and the mutual needs of human societies for satisfaction, help, comfort and peace, within and among themselves. "Fundamentalism", however, has come to denote many complications.

It would take whole books to adequately address these facets of complication, but just for our present purpose, which is to indicate some sense of the complexity, I have attempted to summarise them by way of Table 1. Admittedly, this summary is only a caricatured treatment of the subject and is not meant to be absolute nor exhaustive. I am quite aware that there are, and can be, many inter- and intra- categorical exceptions to the various designated interpretations of fundamentalist Muslim women. For instance, not all Western feminists will regard fundamentalist Muslim women as symbols of Islamic misogyny. Indeed, some may straddle between, say, seeing women as symbols of un-conscientious and un-refined patriarchal transliterations of Islamic injunctions, and as instruments of political economy expediencies. The summary is only meant to function as a general (and easily accessible) literature survey.

I, too, may be one of those who find problems with an overly neat judgement of fundamentalist Muslim women. Through a reflection upon my own life as a fundamentalist (this adjective is voluntary) Muslim woman and feminist geographer, I hope to be able to illustrate some of the complex meanings of gender and religion that many women, at least in my part of the world, have had to negotiate.

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I was born fifty years ago into a Muslim family. So, you might say I am a Muslim by accident of birth. I was nurtured (some might say indoctrinated) within Islam as I grew up. From this upbringing I learned to profess the five pillars of Islam which form the framework of Muslim life: faith, prayer, concern for the needy, self-purification through fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are able. By age six, I was able to complete the whole month of fasting, but I must say that my critical thinking about Islam only started embryonically when I was about fifteen when I became fascinated with the translation of the Quran. This I remembered when I looked back at the copy of the holy book that belonged to my father and found my red inked handwritten notes and marks on some of the verses. Before that I could remember only occasional moments of feeling religious when I was at the local mosque listening to some religious lectures or when I 'contemplated' the sky. I memorised the meaning of one particular *surah* (chapter), Chapter 112 entitled *al-Ikhlās* (meaning sincerity in professing the purity and unity of God), not only because of its shortness but also because of what struck me as its beauty.

Other than that I would say my religiosity during those adolescent years was mainly governed by a kind of romanticism about piety. I remember the urge to want to practise the Quranic injunction on the *Muslimah* (female believers in Islam) mode of dressing<sup>i</sup>; but I only managed to cover my head for two weeks because the situation in Singapore (where I lived my first 18 years) at that time was such that I often found myself to be the only Muslim girl doing that in public spaces. I could not bear the feeling of being seen as so different. Soon I was back in Western skirts and blouses and hair uncovered.

I returned to my country of birth, Malaysia, when I was 19, to join the university in the capital city where I met the man who would become my husband. Our 'courting' at university was not really a happy time for me, religiously speaking, because even though the time we spent together involved going to lectures, classes and libraries, my religious conscience was not clear. I remember how relieved I felt when we finally got married shortly after the convocation, only to leave him as my postgraduate scholarship required that I do my masters programme overseas. We settled down after I obtained my masters two years later and I began a career as a university lecturer. I remember stating my 'conditions' to my husband before the religious solemnisation of our marriage: that I should be allowed to continue with my career and that I would be free to spend my income as I preferred, including to continue supporting my parents financially as I did before marriage. How happy I was to discover ten years later that establishing such conditions was perfectly acceptable within Islam.

Ten years later found me in the thick of pursuing Islam as a comprehensive way of life (*ad-deen*). By that I mean grappling with Islam as an adult and in a consciously questioning and critical manner. One impetus for that was my own work as an academic, which I took, and still do take, as searching for truths. The identification of this career with my religious faith is almost automatic for me. It started with my doctoral proposal where I confronted the epistemological problem of addressing my research subjects, Malay rubber smallholders who were all Muslims, using the framework of Western secular epistemologies and methodologies. The time-space frame of Muslims extends beyond earthly life in the sense that their idea of an afterlife influences the conduct of their present life on earth – thoughts, decisions, actions and so on. So, what started as a proposed research on "Location and wellbeing – the case of Malaysian rubber smallholders" became "Location and wellbeing – a critical inquiry into positivist geography with special reference to Malaysian rubber smallholders"<sup>ii</sup>.

It took me eight years to submit that doctoral thesis, because there was a lot that I had to make clear to myself. Not only were my research subjects the reason for my having to look into Islamic epistemologies. The fact that Western social sciences and humanities in late 1970s and early 1980s were beginning to unravel into post-modernist multiple relativities also triggered my all-out search for the 'truths' while writing the thesis. In the course of making things clear to myself I got hooked on two things: (1) reading modern sciences into Quranic verses, and (2) Mohammed Iqbal's, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*<sup>iii</sup>. And I ended up writing five 'appendices' for my supervisor (who was an atheist) in the United Kingdom. These consisted of five manuscripts ranging from 77 to about 160 pages: 'The problem of the Absolute Reality or God', 'The problem of the material world or nature', 'The problem of the origin of man', 'The problem of the nature of human action/agency', and 'Outstanding problems in Western scholarship'.

Reading modern sciences into Quranic verses is something I never expected to do. Normally, Muslim children attend Quranic classes to read the scripture in Arabic. So like any good parent, my mother sent me to Quranic classes beginning when I was eight so that by eleven I had finished reading the whole scripture in Arabic - without understanding its meaning. It was only when I was fifteen that I started to read the meaning of some of those Arabic verses, first in Malay, then in English. But never did I think that I would soon avail myself of such books as Maurice Bucaille's "*The Bible, The Qur'an and Science*" and "*What is the Origin of Man*"<sup>iv</sup>. I have to highlight this particular episode of my life because its impact has been stupendous on the development of my faith and 'fundamentalism'. For a Muslim living 1,425 years after the illiterate Prophet, if there is one instrument that can convince me of the truth of the Quran and its teachings today, it must be modern science<sup>v</sup>.

However, the real point I wish to make in regard to being or becoming a fundamentalist Muslim woman is that, unlike my mother who still routinely reads the Quran in Arabic,

without understanding the superficial meaning of the verses in Malay (the only language that she knows), her fundamentalist daughter will not settle for anything less than going through the Arabic root words to compare them with findings of modern sciences such as astro- and particle physics, microbiology, archaeology and the like.

I must say that Iqbal's reconstructive interpretation of Islamic thought had been the greatest impetus for my enthusiasm about 'doing' Islam as a way of life. It really gave me a framework for action. At the age of 32 I joined the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM) (now accessible at <http://www.abim.org.my/>), first as a committee member of its women's wing, then as its deputy head. I remember how busy I was writing working papers and giving talks, mainly on the issue of Muslim women in the rapid development and modernization of developing nations with majority Muslim population such as Malaysia.

In one paper entitled 'Woman And Family In Islam' (1987), presented in the Media Seminar on Islam in the Modern World, organised by the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) and Press Foundation of Asia (PFA) and sponsored by Rabitah al-Alam al Islami (Muslim World League), I addressed FAQs with regard to Muslim women and equality (namely spiritual-humanistic status, intellectual status and education, marriage, motherhood and family, polygamy, divorce, inheritance, chastity, domesticity, social involvement, and leadership). In doing this, I tried to present the Islamic perspective as authentically as possible, including venturing my own stance on some critical points. For instance, on leadership and equality, I had this to conclude after presenting the more reserved stance of conventional Muslim scholars:

Whatever the rationalisation furnished by various quarters on the relative unsuitability of women for top-level leadership roles, it must be pointed out that the Quran does not expressly prohibit women from assuming them. Indeed, one may point out the fact that when the Queen of Sheba was censured by God in the Quran (27: 22-44), she was censured not because of her political position as a ruler but because of her worshipping of false gods on the account of which Solomon was sent to warn and correct her<sup>vi</sup>.

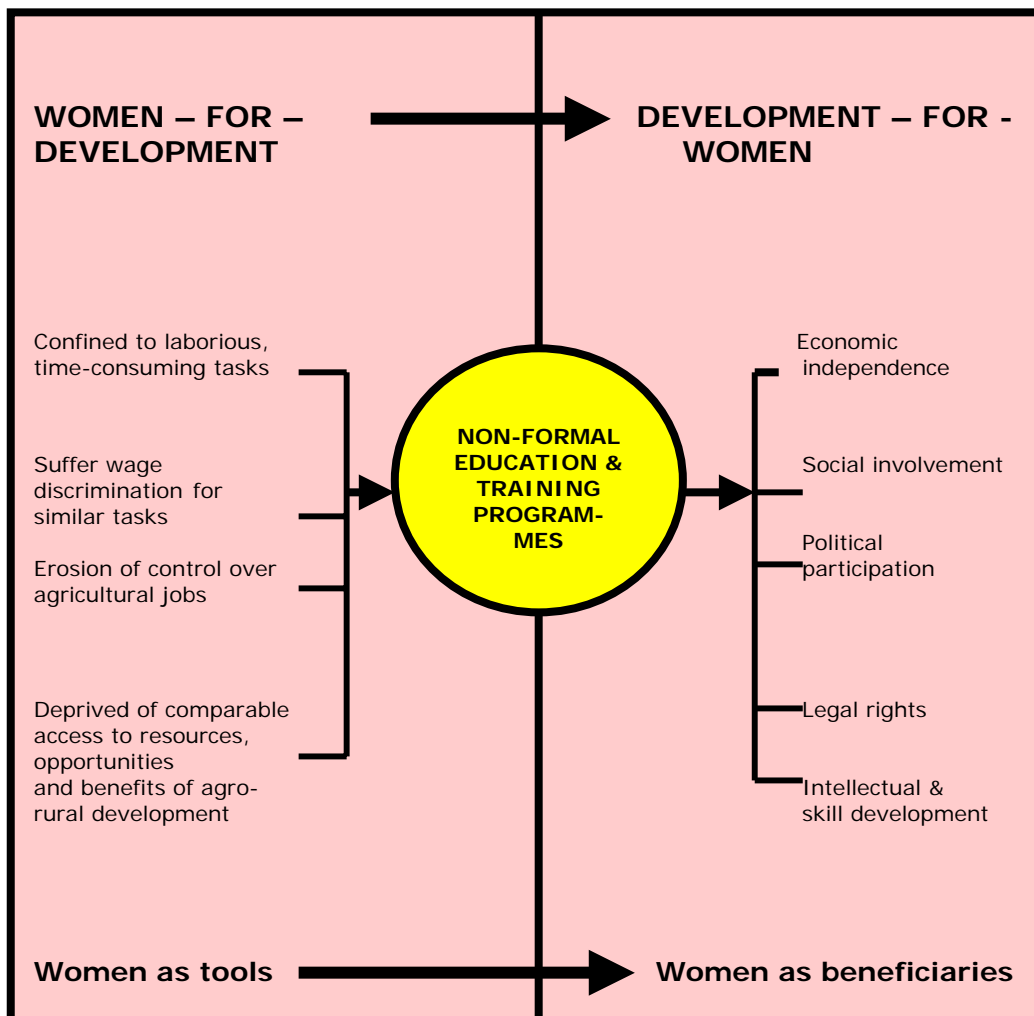
Nevertheless, I must also stress the understandable anxiety of Muslim scholars and communities alike on the socio-moral problems besetting a rapidly industrializing Muslim society. There was (and is) in Malaysia, a fear of the annihilation of sacred religious values as faced by Muslim female factory workers in Malaysia<sup>vii</sup>, the everyday dilemma of burden overload affecting working women like me<sup>viii</sup>, and what is seen as the "moral decay" (drug abuse, unwed mothers, disposal of dead illegitimate infants, under-aged girls running away from their folks' custody) increasingly overtaking Muslim youths<sup>ix</sup>. Muslim activists like me were (and are) called upon to address the issues. I have frequently spoken on such topics as the support available to Muslim women in returning to their religious principles<sup>x</sup>; the need for Muslim men to realize that the onus of responsible parenting is actually, Quranically speaking, more on dads than on moms; and the need for Muslim society as a whole to be able to exercise sensible discrimination with regard to Western modernization when embarking on 'development'<sup>xi</sup>.

One point that I would like to highlight here is that rather unexpectedly for some, my work as a feminist geographer and my activism as an Islamist seem to have converged quite nicely, instead of the opposite. Had I not joined ABIM I might not have learned the real spirit about the position of women in Islam, which would surely have been led to conflict *vis a vis* my feminist work. But, as it turned out, I have been spared such difficulties. For instance, my 1980s studies on negative perceptions of a local source community with regard to the imposition of un-Islamic values by multi-national companies on female factory workers in Malaysia, had contributed to the imperative of understanding the dilemma faced by the local community and to the larger national discourse on persuading the companies to accept the logic that a religiously contented workforce would mean greater productivity and profitability for the companies. The result is that, since the 1990s, Muslim female factory workers in this country have not had to wear Western dresses, go to balls and parties or social outings, and the like. Instead, they now wear Islamic uniforms (head covered, long sleeved and high neck tops, and long skirts or trousers), are allowed breaks for the daily prayers, and may organise religious classes for their leisure activities. From the women's perspective this is double empowerment: economic as well as socio-psychological and cultural. The MNCs' gains are also twofold:

economic (higher productivity) and social (acceptance of the local and national society), while the Malaysian government sees increases in its tax revenues and job creation.

Similarly, my work on the imperative of women in fighting rural poverty in Malaysia goes along well with the on-going government-sponsored rural micro-credit schemes called '*Amanah Ikhtiar*' (modelled after the Bangladesh Grameen Bank initiative) which utilises the Islamic principles of '*amar makruf*' (implementing good deeds) and deliberately favour female rather than male participants because of the women's proven greater reliability<sup>xii</sup>. In fact, I would imagine that it was because of the absence of incongruity between my feminist work and my Islamic activism that the Division of Women's Affairs, Ministry of National Unity and Social Development of Malaysia has entrusted to me, in 1992, the task of advising them on the non-formal educational and training programmes for women in Malaysia's agricultural sector and ministry<sup>xiii</sup>, and the task of over-viewing micro enterprises and entrepreneur development for rural and island women in the Asia-Pacific<sup>xiv</sup>. The same applies when in 1995 the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, Malaysia commissioned me to write a chapter on women in Malaysian development for its 1993/94 *Social Report*<sup>xv</sup>.

So, it is quite impossible for me to distinguish the feminist from the Islamist in my work. I look again, for instance, at the following figure which summarises the paradigm change that I had advocated for the benefit of rural women in Malaysia<sup>xvi</sup>:



In advocating that non-formal educational and training programmes should be for the delivering of women from being just tools to actual beneficiaries of development, I believe I was speaking in one breath – feminist because I was advancing the women's cause and Islamic because advancing the women's cause is a religious duty in Islam. You can, of course, insist that my formal secular education would have sensitised me to (secular,

Western) feminism; yet as a fundamentalist, would not the very fundamentals of my faith determine my judgement of (secular, Western) feminism prior to my espousal of it?

Be that as it may, I must emphasise, however, that in trying to help my society steering their 'development' course aright I did not preach Western-bashing. How could I when it must be admitted, in all honesty, that there are so many good things that are in the West, things that Islam ardently advocates such as civil society, social security, government by the people, rule of law, freedom of expression, cleanliness, transparency, accountability, etc., including, of course, the invaluable contributions of feminist geography. Indeed, I have no qualms in assimilating all that is good from the West in my Islamic discourse.

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How time flies. Now, I am past 50 and a grandmother. My age does not qualify me to be in the Youth Movement anymore, so I am now active in the Just World Movement<sup>xvii</sup> (now accessible at <http://www.just-international.org>). I am not sure if hormonal change due to menopause is the main culprit but I find myself more sad and melancholic about life and humanity than ever before. It cannot be because of a feeling of financial or material insecurity or of worry that I will not be looked after should old age incapacitate me. Perhaps it is due to trepidation at seeing how rampantly we, humankind, have made a career in self destruction by misusing our personal, societal and environmental resources; that agony of seeing, time and again, the perils of your brethren exercising misguided choices when these can be avoided; that tragic pain of seeing too frequently the failure of your species to live up to expectations; that demoralising sense of helplessness at your own inability to save the situation; and that sense of embarrassing futility at knowing that for all that you suffer inside for your fellows many will throw back the reply "Hey, who needs heroes?".

It could also be due to a deep undeclared dismay of an academic who, having dedicated her professional life to dealing with 'facts' and knowledge about how the world works, should find, increasingly, that how the world really works is far from as posited by those textbook theories and models and hypotheses that she helps to advance; that somewhat shocking realization that all that formal knowledge that is your trade line is suddenly inaccurate, hence unusable and redundant<sup>xviii</sup>. In saying this I am not at all discounting the saving grace of such a field as feminist geography; but equally, deep inside, I fear if this too will be a casualty of epistemological rigidities.

Yet, it could also be due to a pang of guilty conscience, the kind that you feel when your deed produces an adverse consequence even while it was not so intended. When my firstborn, now a father, insists that his wife should be a fulltime home-maker even at the expense of his family living a modest life, I know he is sending me the sharp message that I am still not forgiven for leaving him with my mother when I went to the United Kingdom to fulfil my post-grad residential requirement, and later for being a heavily preoccupied working mother and social activist. Didn't I know that this is one reason why Islam does not encourage (albeit it does not disallow) a mother to be so engaged outside the home; that if I had done this I would have saved a dear soul from an unnecessary suffering? Of course I could, and have, marshalled all the arguments for my professional career and social activism but they are still no substitute for a missed opportunity of enhancing one's precious family happiness. I do not think, if given a chance, I would do it differently but the truth is I am unhappy because my son is adversely affected because of it. And it cannot be undone at that. So, you might say that I, too, must get to taste the bitter part of that fruit of overt feminism. The only reason that this leaves me undaunted, if bruised, is the simple fact that my son cannot dismiss the religious sanction of my *amar makruf* as it is binding on every able Muslim, male or female. In other words, in the name of doing this public duty incumbent upon a Muslim, my religion saves my feminism.

Finally, and perhaps more honestly, it could also be due to a private sense of relative failure that I have not achieved enough in terms of fulfilling my religious duties. I am still so far behind with practical, on the ground, charitable work. After all these years, what have I accomplished? I may have spoken much but have done precious little in terms of practical things that really count for piety. I truly fear that there are still many embarrassing gaps between my words and my actual deeds. Maybe my son's contrary act

is God reminding me how my materialism is getting in the way of my real 'ego construction'; that I, too, am proving to be an easy victim to that familiar human mistake. Look at me; I could not even consider driving anything other than a BMW or a Mercedes, or moving out of my high-end bungalow! Yet, everyday I cry my heart out whenever pictures of famine-stricken African children and widows, or Moldavian and other children systematically driven to begging or prostitution and paedophiles because of extreme poverty are flashed on the television screen. Some hypocrite I am turning out to be. And time is running out.

Be that as it may, I would not be truthful if I say I see no hope at all for the betterment of the prevailing human condition. Indeed, I harbour much hope for the prospects of my fellows in the West to get the better of their present state of confusion and obfuscation that have led to the advent of unfortunate happenings such as the tragic war in Iraq. It is heartening to read, for instance, "Why They Hate Us" by Mick Youther<sup>xix</sup>, Mark Robinowitz's "A Parable for understanding 9/11", "The Group of Eight Overseas" by Joan Veon (Posted on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2004 at <http://www.rense.com>), "What US government has really done for the people in the Mid-east", and "Americans march against U.S., Israeli occupation" (<http://www.islamonline.org>, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2004). I salute that new breed of Western journalists (the likes of Robert Fisk and John Pilger), as I do incredible organizations like "Jews Against Zionism" (<http://www.jewsagainstzionism.com/>). For realistically speaking, I have to believe in the ascending spirit of the common people in the West to resurrect yet again that sense of fair play, however imperfect it can humanly be. They are the world's hope in leading the way to true emancipation from errant elites of power whose twisting ways have wreaked havoc for us all.

### **Representations of fundamentalist Muslim women**

Coming back to the question of who or what is a fundamentalist Muslim woman, I hope I have managed to illustrate to you why or how a simplistic answer will not do. At least, as far as my case is concerned you cannot reduce me to the *burqa*-clad Taliban's women of Afghanistan that the West wants so much to liberate, or the restricted Saudi women the West is inclined to see as representing Islam's misogyny. Equally, neither am I the Westernized feminist who would only cast justice for women in secular terms. I have taken my faith seriously by adopting a highly critical and searching attitude towards it, which is why I note with much warmth the efforts made by some feminist geographers, recently, to move away from reducing Muslim women to one or another of these stereotypes. For instance, the introduction that Sharp and Dowler wrote to a special issue of *Space and Polity* in 2001<sup>xx</sup> explored the complexity of this issue; including the range of meanings that veiling can hold (from religious piety to a strategy that avoids hassle in public space to a fashion statement). Indeed, many other feminists and feminist geographers have similarly been at pains to explore this tension<sup>xxi</sup>. The efforts that such feminist geographers (and others) have made not to fall into the Orientalist stereotypes must be recognized and further advanced.

In fact, I have been an extrovert activist whose pre-occupation has not been about narrow-minded conservatism or bigotry but cleaning up the mess that come to my society as a consequence of being so open hearted to the secular materialist 'progress' that the West champions. Yet I identify with the larger humanity and our common predicaments. Indeed, I find myself more conscious about these common issues than I am with being a woman. I am more worried about my religious faithfulness than, for instance, about not getting even with my male counterparts, although it behoves me to stress that the feminist vision is greater and soars higher than just about getting even.

Yet, I am not downplaying the importance of fighting for the women's cause. Only that I find it more to the spirit of my faith to do it in the same parlance as any Muslim should do for the *mustadhaaffin* (the oppressed). For me, if there is any special difference that being a woman can make, it must be the indubitable ability to nurture a spiritually superior humanity; the kind which shall pre-empt and prevent the rise of fellow exploiters, victimizers and destroyers - be they men or women.

Now, are you going to say that I am a progressive instead of a fundamentalist Muslim woman? Think again, for I do faithfully don the Muslim head - covers.

## Implications for feminist geography

The preceding discussion on existing discourses on fundamentalist Muslim women gives us an array of interpretations of fundamentalist Muslim women in contemporary discourses. As summarized in Table 1, the interpretations differ according to who the discourses are and at whom the discourses are most directed. The survey also reveals a fivefold set of implications for further work in feminist geography:

(1) At least in certain parts of the world, fundamentalist Muslim women may be manifestations of patriarchal oppression and misogyny. In this respect there is indeed a legitimate discursive role for *feminist* geography. Feminist geography 'emphasizes questions of gender inequality and the oppression of women in virtually all spheres of life', and its goals include uncovering and countering such inequality and discrimination<sup>xxii</sup>. Feminist geography involves recognizing women's common experience of, and resistance to, oppression by men, and a commitment to end it 'so that women can define and control themselves', and provides a foundation on which resistance to the masculinist hegemony can be based<sup>xxiii</sup>.

(2) Extant discourses on fundamentalist Muslim women are largely confined to the Middle Eastern section of the Islamic world. Much work awaits geographers of gender to bring to the fore the reality of fundamentalist Muslim women in the remaining sections of the Islamic world. For instance, enquiries into the Malay archipelago of Southeast Asia wherein Indonesia and Malaysia are home to the largest Muslim population in the world, will produce different pictures of fundamentalist Muslim women than either the misogynous one (of veiled, secluded, ever-passive, victimized, mute, immobile and obedient creatures) that the world media have been offering lately or the bold, positive and 'liberated' feminist image (the unveiled, autonomous, independent, economically successful, educated, articulate and proud women threatening to the 'establishment Islam' and to the 'fundamentalists') as found in Western countries and Westernised Muslim societies.

In other words there is still here a role for feminist *geography* (as distinct from *feminist* geography) which nonetheless will bring the study on fundamentalist Muslim women closer to the wider feminist project of studying the lives, experiences and behaviour of the women.

(3) That it is imperative for feminist geographers to distinguish between Islam the religion and Islam as cultural translations. Since Islam the 'religion' may not be as straightforward to the laypersons and some non-Muslims, it is safer to treat and present findings as cultural translations endeavouring to approximate, rather than to apprehend, the ideal of Islam the religion. In other words, it makes more sense to work with the cultural, experiential senses of Islam, rather than a textbook definition of it, as it is unfair to discredit the religion because of the cultural failings of its adherents.

The secular nature of Western knowledge leads us to conclude that the social construction of the discipline of geography is such that it is now necessarily 'secularist'. But the real danger or constraint is not so much that it allows no space to non-secular forms of knowledge but that it sees it fit to judge these non-secular forms of knowledge according to its own terms. For instance, the common secularist view about religion is that it is *part* of culture; but there are societies like Muslims who do not regard religion as part of culture but place it *above* culture. Thus the problem is compounded when the secularist geographer treats the Muslims' God as s/he would the cultural and mortal adherents.

The question is can secularist geographers, feminist or otherwise, accept other epistemologies or modes of expression that offend their notions of clearness, effectiveness, and beauty like indeed, Muslim scholars, for instance, have been doing all the time, and in silence, when they address secularist audiences? Can the secularist geographers admit to change, to the recognition of difference, and share the prerogative with non-secularists to legislate language and make linguistic changes especially when the occasion warrants as it does with the task of deciphering fundamentalist Muslim women?

(4) That it is only sensible that any discourse on fundamentalist Muslim women takes cognizance of the political-economic context in which the Muslim society and the country studied are situated. This is not to descend into essentialist structural-materialist determinism. Rather, it is to account for the significantly critical and crucial role of the state, whether Islamic or otherwise, in the production and sustaining of contrasting images and identities of Muslim women, linking these to the political-economic interests of the nation state and related issues of global geopolitics and uneven development.

This should awaken geographers to the fact that for many Muslim societies and countries 'modernisation' (rather than *post*-modernism), and its corollaries of 'progress' and 'development' are still ongoing, an experiential phase in which they still find themselves, a set of goals the elusiveness of which only means, for them, having to work still harder. It is in this context that the promotion and rejection of certain identities of fundamentalist Muslim women are instrumentalised at varying degrees.

(5) That orientalism tendencies must be guarded against in any discourse on fundamentalist Muslim women. A major source for geographers' appreciation of their own positionality and hence partial representation of the world (in every sense of the term partial) is orientalism, that active process of othering, in this case, of exhibiting "the" Oriental nature of Muslim societies, their religion and their women in a profoundly worldly set of texts which, in a quite fundamental sense, made neo-colonization, pre-emptive aggression and dispossession possible. Healthy discourses on fundamentalist Muslim women requires that geography be emancipated from that 'Western' hegemony which is based on partial views of the rest of the world, and often promoted for political and other reasons.<sup>xxiv</sup> As Gregory argues:

To assume that we are entitled to speak only of what we know by virtue of our own experience is not only to reinstate an empiricism: it is to institutionalize parochialism. Many of us have not been very good at listening to others and learning from them, but the present challenge is surely to find ways of comprehending those other worlds - including our relations with them and our responsibilities toward them - without being invasive, colonizing and violent. If we are to free ourselves from universalizing our own parochialisms, we need to learn how to reach beyond particularities, to speak to the larger questions without diminishing the significance of the places and the people to which they are accountable.<sup>xxv</sup>



Table 1: Various interpretations of fundamentalist Muslim women

	<b>For whom</b>				
	<i>Western societies</i>	<i>Muslim societies (Middle East)</i>	<i>Muslim communities (Western countries)</i>	<i>Other Muslim societies (eg. Southeast Asia)</i>	
				<i>Westernised / secularised</i>	<i>Religious</i>
<i>Western feminists</i>	<b>1</b>			<b>1</b>	
<i>Orientalists</i>	<b>2</b>				
<i>Patriarchal Muslim fundamentalists</i>	<b>3</b>				
	<b>4</b>				
<i>Islamic feminists</i>	<b>5</b>				
<i>Political-economy determinists</i>	<b>6</b>				
<i>Ordinary Muslim women voluntarily wanting to improve devotion to Divine precepts</i>		<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>		<b>7</b>
<i>Muslim women challenged by extreme humiliation</i>		<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>		<b>8</b>
<i>Contemporary converts-with-conviction to Islam from the West</i>	<b>9</b>				

**Key:**

1. FMW as symbols of Islamic misogyny
2. FMW as symbols of Islamic injustice and terrorism, therefore deserved to be censured, punished and dominated
3. FMW as literal (cultural) translations of Islamic injunctions
4. FMW as resistance to Western and secular cultural domination
5. FMW as symbols of un-conscientious and un-refined patriarchal transliterations of Islamic injunctions
6. FMW as instruments of political economy expediencies
7. FMW as symbols the devotees' sacred faithfulness to God
8. FMW as sacrifice and redemption of dignity
9. FMW as truths of Divine Wisdom

FMW: Fundamentalist Muslim Women

“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss” (24:31).

Now many western feminists would have problems with this. One aspect of their unease would be gender inequality in modesty: Why women? What about men? Why are men exempted? The answer is in Islam modesty is also enjoined on men. Here's the injunction of the Quran for an example: “Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do” (24:30). It goes without saying, at least for the believers, that in the context of physical modesty, it is the bosoms of men rather than those of women that get exempted from covering.

Of course the unease persists for some who would ground their resentment in terms of women's human right to bare their breasts whenever and wherever they please, and the Quran says “Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error...” (2:256). What is significant, however, is that herein lies a point of tension between Islamic feminist geographers and their secular counterparts. Take, for instance, the case of Western and westernized tourists who sunbath in bikinis (sometimes naked) on the beach lying next to a Muslims' village (there are hundreds of such villages in Malaysia). These tourists may not realize it but the local villagers are suffering from a religious (not just cultural) pollution because of their exercising of freedom. The analogy is akin to the utility conflict between smokers and non-smokers in using public spaces. Now, would a Western feminist write in favour of the visitors' human rights to “immodesty” while her Islamic counterpart writes in favour of the hosts' human rights to modesty? Or that the issue will now be transfigured to something else because of the futility of engaging in such ‘dubious’ things as modesty? Or that both perspectives are accommodated because their co-existence is imperative to the meaningful progress of feminist geography itself? Hence the question I put forward earlier: Can the secularist geographers admit to change, to the recognition of difference, and share the prerogative with non-secularists to legislate language and make linguistic changes especially when the occasion warrants as it does with the task of deciphering Muslim society?

The implications of the difference are so far reaching when we enter into the domain of policy prescriptions for development. Developing countries like Malaysia are always in the dilemma with regard to the tourist dollar. We need to create jobs for the locals but what should we do about the religious or moral disutilities that are incurred. Local youngsters take to imbibe the ‘difference’ that the visitors introduce and this de-stabilises the religious integrity of the local community. Should they just acquiesce in this loss and annihilation so that Malaysia can continue to impress upon the (Western dominated) world that it too is progressive? It is this kind of mess that Islamic activists like me are expected to clean up.

<sup>ii</sup> Part of the thesis was later published as Amriah Buang 2001. *Explaining Farmers' Well-being*. Bangi: Univision Press, 248 pp.

<sup>iii</sup> The book was first published in 1934 by Oxford University Press, London, in 1977 by Ashraf, Lahore.

<sup>iv</sup> Dr. Maurice Bucaille, born in 1920, former chief of the Surgical Clinic, University of Paris, has for a long time been deeply interested in the correspondences between the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and modern secular knowledge. His classical studies of the scriptural languages, including Arabic, in association with his knowledge of hieroglyphics, have allowed him to hold a multidisciplinary inquiry, in which his personal contribution as a medical doctor has produced conclusive arguments. His work, *“Mummies of the Pharaohs - Modern Medical Investigations”* (St. Martins Press, 1990), won a History Prize from the Académie Française and another prize from the French National Academy of Medicine. His other works include: *“What is the Origin of Man”* (Seghers, 1988), *“Moses and Pharaoh, the Hebrews in Egypt”*, (NTT Mediascope Inc, 1994); and *“Réflexions sur le Coran”* (Mohamed Talbi & Maurice Bucaille, Seghers, 1989). After a study which lasted ten years, Dr. Maurice Bucaille addressed the French Academy of Medicine in 1976 concerning the existence in the Qur'an of certain statements concerning physiology and reproduction. His reason for doing that was that: “...our knowledge of these disciplines is such, that it is impossible to explain how a text produced at the time of the Qur'an could have contained ideas that have only been discovered in modern times....The above observation makes the hypothesis advanced by those who see Muhammad as the author of the Qur'an untenable. How could a man, from being illiterate, become the most important author, in terms of literary merits, in the whole of Arabic literature? How could he then pronounce truths of a scientific nature that no other human-being could possibly have developed at that time, and all this without once making the slightest error in his pronouncement on the subject?”

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<sup>v</sup> After all the Quran does make the claim that it is a "Book that makes things clear" (43:2) so that "...they (men of learning) may reflect on its Signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition" (38:29). Thus, when findings of modern science gradually correspond to the Quranic verses I could see that science is one of the ways that God has safeguarded the integrity of His message just like He has pronounced it, "We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it" (15:9).

<sup>vi</sup> Amriah Buang, 1997. *Woman And Family In Islam*, paper presented in the Media Seminar on Islam in the Modern World, organised by the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) and Press Foundation of Asia (PFA) and sponsored by *Rabitah al-Alam al Islami* (Muslim World League), Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>vii</sup> American and other multi-national companies adopted liberal Western social mores. Many companies organized beauty contests where female workers vied for awards and prizes which clearly encouraged them to become 'sex symbols' through the promotion of beauty or 'sweetheart' contests, fashion shows and beauty culture classes. Production operators who won beauty contests were usually promoted to the role of the company's receptionist or social escort for company guests and overseas visitors. The prizes offered in the contests included free courses in grooming, overseas trips and often overnight hotel reservations for two. The women workers were encouraged to invite their boyfriends to annual beauty contests and balls. At these functions, alcoholic drinks were freely available. As employees, the Malay workers had to adapt to these cultural demands in full knowledge that they were transgressing Islamic injunctions. Although not all multinational companies forced their workers to participate in such activities, inevitably, workers had to adapt if they wanted favourable recognition from superiors. In addition, many factory women, being young and single, were eager to experiment with new ideas and thus were easily influenced by what they perceived as the normal practices of modern (Western) people and the modern (Western) way of life. Indeed, many migrant girls perceived modern urban life as revolving around dating, dancing and alcohol. Given the imposed Westernised cultural atmosphere and the competitiveness among the female workers, it was very common to observe attempts by the women workers to dress according to the latest fashion and behave like Westerners. Related to this was the development of a consumer culture aimed at the same feminine ideal. Workers became the victims of hire-purchase 'con-men' who could be seen at their door each pay-day collecting instalments for dresses and cosmetics purchased on credit. Society's attitude to the Malay factory women has led several multinational companies to amend their recreational activities in order avoid public controversy. Substantial progress has been achieved with respect to the moral de-stigmatisation of Malay factory women. Beauty pageants, annual balls, Western-type dancing and the consumption of alcohol are now replaced with religious classes, and male and female sporting activities have become segregated. They now can wear headscarves and full covered uniform, get time off to perform daily prayers, and have their prayer rooms built within the factory premise. Happily, all these changes have resulted in greater productivity for the companies. (See Amriah Buang, 1993: *Development and Factory Women: Negative Perceptions from a Malaysian source area*, in J. Momsen and V. Kinnaird (eds.), *Different Places, Different Voices : Gender and Development in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, Routledge, New York, pp. 197 – 210; second edition forthcoming)

<sup>viii</sup> For spending less time at home to do full-time parenting, Muslim working wives are often made to feel responsible if their children become drug addicts, school drop-outs, or involved in illicit sexual and criminal activities. For a perspective on the working wives' double burden (work and home) and related dilemma (e.g. trying to ease the problem at home by employing migrant housemaids) (see Amriah Buang, 1997: *Elusive Rescuers: Coping with Migrant Housemaids, A Malaysian Experience*. In Fairhurst, J. *et al.* (eds.) *Migration and Gender*. International Geographical Union Commission on Gender & Geography, University of Pretoria, pp. 49 – 68). The tendency of society to put more of the blame on working mothers certainly provides fertile ground for a feminist critique. But for Muslim society, even in progressive Malaysia, casting it in Western feminist terms may backfire. The trick is to take such a society on its own ground, where in this case, my role as an Islamic feminist is to remind my society that their oftentimes male-biased religious education has made them forgetful of what the Quran really says about parenting and men's duty in it. They need to be reminded that the injunction is from the Quran itself, not from some Western women lib protagonists. Note also that in highlighting that particular verse I am **not** re-interpreting the Quran; I merely bring it up for their attention.

<sup>ix</sup> Amriah Buang, 1995: The role and responsibilities of Muslim women in facing contemporary challenges. In Nik Safiah Karim & Robiah Sidin (eds.) *Gemanita (the voice of women), No.1, Women in Development*, Malaysian Association of Women Graduates, Petaling Jaya, pp 1.33 - 46. (in Malay)

<sup>x</sup> For instance, many Muslim women hanker after Western women liberation because they do not know that Islam has provided amply for them. Here are some examples: The Quran contradicts the notion that women have no **human rights** as it unambiguously declares: They have rights similar to those against them, in a just manner... (2: 228). In regard to **domestic duties**, Islam has relieved women of all manual drudgery. According to strict Islamic injunctions, it is not obligatory for a woman to cook the food for her husband or children, or to wash their clothes or even to suckle their infants. A woman may refuse to do all of these things without this being made a ground of legal complaint

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against her. If she undertakes these duties out of her regard for the husband, it is an act of sheer grace.

In regard to the **authority of men and women** in their respective spheres, the following tradition of the Prophet shows the states enjoyed by women under Islam. Man is the ruler in his home. He will be held responsible for the conduct of his dependents, and woman is the ruler in her husband's home. She will also be held responsible for the conduct of her dependents (Bukhari). This tradition makes the wife co-equal of her husband in home affairs. Only in larger matters affecting the total welfare of the family the husband is given a degree of superiority, since two coordinate authorities with equal powers are likely to lead to clashes and conflicts such as may destroy the balance and poise of family life. It must be remembered that this allowance of superiority is also because the husband is the bread-winner, as the Quran determines: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means" (4: 34). The husband's superiority over the wife does not in the least mean total subjugation of the wife by the husband. For it is open to both of them to enter into agreement prior to marriage on matters which they consider important for the regulation of their future relations. Such agreements shall be parts of the marriage contract and adjudicable in law-courts, provided they are not repugnant to the basic rights and obligations of husband and wife as stated by Islam. Thus the author of *Nail al-Autar* (Pt. VII, p.641) says: "The wife can lay down conditions prior to marriage relating to her way of living, her food, house and dress, according to the social status of the husband and that her just rights shall not be whittled". So, just as a man can stipulate that his wife shall not go out except by his permission, it is open to the woman to insist that she shall not be prevented from going out of her home for her suitable economic and social needs, so long as this action does not disturb the work of her husband or the proper upbringing of the children. All these matters come within the marriage agreement, but since they are specific to the couple particular needs, much depends on the actual relations of the husband and wife after marriage and their mutual understanding. But they serve to show that the wife does not lose, under Islam, her separate legal personality, but retains full possession of it. She can sue her husband in a law-court if the implied or express terms of the marriage contract are violated by the husband.

**Inheritance and equality.** Another right of the Muslim woman which is a part of Islamic law is the right to inherit property. The method of division of inheritance is clearly laid down in the Quran and the general rule is that women are entitled to inherit half the share given to a man. If taken in isolation from other legislation this may appear to be unfair. However, it must be remembered that in accordance with the verse of the Quran quoted earlier (4: 34), men are charged with the maintenance of all the women and children in their family, and therefore their necessary obligations of expenditure are far higher than those of women. The half-share that a woman inherits may therefore be considered a generous one since it is for her alone. Any such money or property which a woman owns, not to mention her dowry, or any business which she runs is entirely her own and her husband has no right to any of it (Source: Buang, 1987, pp.11-2, 25).

**Polygamy and equality:** Much harsh and unthinking criticism has been levelled against Islam for having permitted polygamy. It is not realised that the Islamic permission for polygamy was and remains conditional. It arose out of the circumstances that Islam found itself engaged in a series of wars with its foes. This naturally led to the infanticide, adultery, prostitution and sexual abstinence during pregnancy. Another ground on which polygamy may be justified is the strong and innate polygamous instinct of man as contrasted with women who are generally monogamous by nature. This fact makes it obvious that some legal provisions should be made for such men; otherwise illegitimate sexual relations are likely to become more frequent. A social system which does not permit polygamy under any circumstances will be constantly threatened with disruptive tendencies owing to the frequency of sexual aberrations. The state may no doubt interfere by making polygamy conditional, as Islam has done, but it has no justification to stop it completely. There are other cases where a marriage has not been very successful and the husband loves another woman (the Eternal Triangle). But the first wife may not wish to be divorced. She may no longer love her husband, but she may still respect him and wish to stay with him for the security of marriage, for herself and their children. Similarly, the second woman may not want to break up the man's first family. There are certain cases such as this where both women could accept a polygamous marriage rather than face divorce on the one hand or an extra-marital affair on the other. Among still other reasons for polygamy may be barrenness, constant illness of the wife leading to prolonged sexual abstinence and sexual frigidity which makes some women dislike the act of coitus. Complete prohibition of polygamy under any of these circumstances commonly drives Men to adultery. For all these reasons, Islam did not deem it expedient to abolish the institution of polygamy altogether. Furthermore, it may be recalled that in Arabia before the advent of Islam, polygamy was unlimited. Islam could not have abolished such a deep-rooted custom with its far-reaching economic effects at a sudden stroke. Therefore, as in the case of slavery, it proceeded by gradual steps. First, it limited to four the number of wives a man could have. Then it laid down that a second, third or fourth marriage could not be resorted to unless the husband felt that he could do justice to all his wives in the matter of economic sustenance and general treatment. Thus the Quran has stated:

And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you: two, three and four, but if you fear that you many not do justice to them then marry only one (4: 3).

This passage permits polygamy under certain circumstances: it does not enjoin it nor even permit it unconditionally. In this case the circumstances referred to were those which followed the battle of

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Uhud where many orphans were left in the charge of widows, who would find it difficult to procure the necessary means of support. Hence the care of orphans is particularly enjoined. The Muslims were told that if they could not do justice to the orphans, they might marry the widows whose children would thus become their own children; and as the number of women was now much greater than the number of men, they were permitted to marry up to four women. It is clear then that the permission given by the Quran arose out of particular circumstances. Since these circumstances are likely to recur now and then in the life of the Muslim community and since there will always be individual cases where polygamy may become necessary (as described above) in order to avoid more serious moral and social evils, it is not right to prohibit polygamy by legislation. But since the Quran has made it conditional on a just and equal treatment of the wives, it is open to the State to prescribe conditions under which polygamy will be allowable. For example, it may be laid down that polygamy will be allowed only if a person shows sufficient cause for it and satisfies the authorities that he will be able to bear the additional economic burden (Source: Buang, 1987, pp.16 –20.)

I do realize, however, that claiming: (1) that the Quran grants similar human rights to women as to men; (2) that Islam relieves women of all manual drudgery; (3) that the accordance of authority to men over women in marital relations is only to emphasise men's heavier responsibility for which he is to be held accountable in this life and in the hereafter; (4) that in advocating positive discrimination in inheritance Islam actually secures equality of benefit for the female members of the family; and (5) that Islam's permission of polygamy is conditional instead of *laissez faire* and for the better management of a more honest society, may still not satisfy many a Western feminist. They may still point to the many glaring gaps existing between ideals and practices and take them, at least, as 'proofs' of the impracticability of the Islamic ideals. They are right to assert, and for me to acknowledge, that whatever positive interpretations can be taken from the Quran, this is no guarantee that this is how gender relations will play out in practice in Islamic societies. But for Islamic feminists like me, nonetheless, responsibly distinguishing the religion from its errant practitioners is the first crucial step towards eradicating so many misrepresentation of Islam in the world, especially with regard to its treatment of women. And if feminist geography can provide ample space for Islamic feminists to inform of their experiences of Islam as 'insiders' it would really contribute to the heuristic cause of feminist geography.

<sup>xi</sup> Amriah Buang, 1994a, *Industrialized and Scientific Society: Moral and Ethical Dimensions*, A talk delivered to the Student Development Seminar organised by the International Institute of Islamic Thought, University of Miami, Florida, USA, June 25 - 27, 1994.

<sup>xii</sup> Amriah Buang, 1992: *Fighting Poverty in Rural Malaysia - The Imperative of Women*. Paper presented to International Geographical Congress, IGU, Washington D.C. 9-14 August, 1992.

<sup>xiii</sup> Amriah Buang, 1992: *Non-Formal Educational and Training Programmes for women - The Case of the Ministry of Agriculture, Malaysia*. Report of the study financed by World Bank and submitted to the Division of Women's Affairs, Ministry of National Unity and Social Development Malaysia, 176 pp. (1992). See also Amriah Buang 1993: *An overview of Human Resource Development Programme for Rural Women in Malaysia with special reference to the small scale agricultural sector*. In Abd. Aziz Abd. Rahman (ed.), *Proceedings, National Workshop on Human Resources and Sustainable Rural Development*, jointly organised by Asean – New Zealand Inter-Institutional Linkages Programme (IILP) and Centre for Agricultural Policy Research, Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, Serdang, pp. 64 - 91.

<sup>xiv</sup> Amriah Buang, 1992: *An Overview of Micro Enterprises and Entrepreneur Development for Rural and Island Women*. Paper presented in the Asia-Pacific Workshop on Micro-Enterprises and Entrepreneur Development for Rural and Island Women, Kuala Lumpur, 2 - 4 December, 1993, 30 pp. This was a key-note paper prepared for Malaysia as representative of the Asia Pacific region in the First Lady Conference on the United Nation Declaration for Rural Women in Geneva, February, 1994.

<sup>xv</sup> Amriah Buang 1995: *Women in Development*. In *Malaysia, Social Report 1993/94*, Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, Kuala Lumpur, Chpt. 15 (in Malay).

<sup>xvi</sup> Amriah Buang, 1997: *Women in Malaysian Agricultural Development: An Overview and a Framework for Evaluation*. ) *Ilmu Alam*, pp. 1 - 22.

<sup>xvii</sup> The International Movement for a Just World (JUST) is a response to the challenge of harnessing our values and our knowledge to create a just world. It is a society which seeks, in a modest way, to develop global awareness of the injustices within the existing system with the aim of evolving an alternative international order which will enhance human dignity and social justice. More specifically, its primary goal is to establish a spiritual and intellectual foundation for a just world. Towards that end, the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) has dedicated itself to the following five objectives:

- To develop public awareness about the iniquities and injustices in the existing global system.

- To create a better understanding, at the popular level, of how control and domination of the global system by a privileged minority challenges human dignity and social justice in both the 'First World' and the 'Third World', in both the 'North' and the 'South'.
- To nurture a deeper appreciation among people everywhere of the urgent need for alternative institutions and arrangements at the global level which are more conducive to the emergence of a just world.
- To raise global consciousness on the crucial importance of fostering attitudes, values and ideals at both the personal and community level which will help attain and sustain a just world.
- To inculcate within the human family a universal spiritual and moral vision of life rooted in the oneness of God which will serve to guide humankind in its quest for a just world.

<sup>xviii</sup> For instance, for all the sophisticated objective theories and models that political scientists may have evolved to explain world politics, the existence and operation of a 'High Cabal' comprising American, British, Saudi and Dutch ruling elites (see [Hhttp://www.hermespress.com/high\\_cabal.htm](http://www.hermespress.com/high_cabal.htm)) makes a more compelling proposition for us who want to make real sense of events such as 9/11 and Bush's war on Iraq. Similarly, many a curriculum on specific world events such as World War II may have to be reformulated in order to avoid previous pitfalls of disinformation (see for e.g. Mickey Z, "D(isinformation)-Day – 60 Years is enough" at [Hhttp://www.rense.com/general53/dday.htm](http://www.rense.com/general53/dday.htm)).

<sup>xix</sup> "If everyone knew the history of US actions in the Middle East, no one would ask — Why do they hate us? American pride and American ignorance of what our government has really done for the people in the Mideast. It's a story of oil and money, weapons and wars, coups, assassinations, hostages, payoffs, double-crosses, and genocide—No wonder they hate us. "If we ever pass out as a great nation we ought to put on our tombstone, 'America died from a delusion that she has moral leadership'." *Will Rogers* ([Hhttp://www.interventionmag.com/cms/print.php?sid=764](http://www.interventionmag.com/cms/print.php?sid=764); Commentary, June 06, 2004).

<sup>xx</sup> Dowler, L. and Sharp, J. (2001) A feminist geopolitics? (editorial for special issue) *Space and Polity* 5(3): 165-176.

<sup>xxi</sup> E.g. Secor, A. (2001) Towards a feminist counter-geopolitics: gender, space and Islamist politics in Istanbul. *Space and Polity* 5(3): 191-211; Zuhur, S. (1992) *Revealing reveiling: Islamist gender ideology in contemporary Egypt*. State University of New York Press.

<sup>xxii</sup> McDowell, L. (1986) Feminist Geography. In Johnson, R., Gregory, D. and Smith, D. eds. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell, p.151.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Johnson, L. (1989) Geography, planning and gender. *New Zealand Geographer* 45: 85.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Sharp 1993 Publishing American Identity: Popular Geopolitics, Myth and The *Reader's Digest*. *Political Geography* 12(6): 491-503.

<sup>xxv</sup> Gregory, D. (1994) *Geographical Imaginations*. Oxford: Blackwell, p.205.